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ABSTRACT

Human survival means more than purely physical survival. Human beings, because of language, also have a cultural nature that must survive. In today's world, all speak, but more than one-fourth of the world's people--and more than half in developing nations--do not have the uniquely human capacity of reading and writing. The diffusion of literacy worldwide has been politically, socially, and economically thwarted. Nonliterate persons do not demand literacy because people do not always recognize their self-interests. Illiterate people are excluded from defining their own world and from contributing to collective knowledge, history, and culture. Literacy is intimately connected to knowledge--one must read something. Literacy brings the reader into touch with modern, scientific, nontraditional knowledge, which is available primarily in print. Literacy is necessary for health, economic development, and social, political, and cultural survival. In this International Literacy Year, individuals, governments, and voluntary organizations must make literacy work for human survival and a more humane existence. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 130

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Literacy for survival and for more than mere survival

by H.S. Bhola

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Linking literacy with survival is not exaggerating or hard-selling literacy.

Survival, of course, means to outlast, to remain. But to *outlast* what physical handicap? What violation by man or beast? What emotional or social cataclysm? What culture shock? And to *remain* in what human state? At what human cost? These questions are intrinsic to the definition of survival.

Survival is interpreted in normative terms – it is not mere existence but a life of acceptable quality. It is more than sheer survival – a matter of a steady pulse and a regular heartbeat. It is more than mere survival – a life supported with barely enough to keep body and soul together but denied political freedom, economic fairness, social acceptance and personal fulfilment.

The practice of the normative ideal of survival is, thus, impossible solely in terms of the biological and the concrete. Its actualization requires the cultural and the symbolic.

It is the uniquely human capacity to make 'symbolic transformations of reality' that has made both culture and technology possible; and it is the word *on which symbolic transformations of reality depend – first on the word as spoken, and, at the present moment in human history,* ***primarily*** *on the word as written and read. Consequently, mere survival, as well as more than mere survival, is* ***impossible without literacy*** *in today's world that is absolutely, completely and irreversibly ordered on the assumptions of universal literacy.*

THE WORLD THAT WAS, AND THE WORLD THAT IS

In the earliest history of Homo sapiens, man and woman were immersed in their reality, they did not rise above it, to view themselves with a clear sense of self-consciousness. Their existence was physical-definitional – their world was defined in terms of the physically present, and the immediately experienced. 'Human' evolution was centered in the gene. Survival was determined by the genetic stock, and by the happenstance of flood, storm, fire, pest and predator. The 'human' urge was to mate. The 'human' vocation was hunting and gathering. The pleasure principle mainly governed lives.

With the development of speech more than a million years ago, all the Homo sapiens became human beings. Speech communication lead to commonality, to community and to culture. Human evolution became co-evolution: determined by the 'gene' (the essential biological unit) and the 'meme' (the essential cultural unit).

Some five thousand years ago, humans learned to write what they spoke and to read what they wrote. They learned to codify and decodify their reality. The step from the spoken word to the written word was a giant leap for humankind. It was a colossal extension of the human ability to make 'symbolic transformations of reality', both physical and mental. With the invention of writing, man and woman re-wrote their life scripts. They re-invented themselves. They were able to have history, and to recreate culture.

Survival was now determined by genetic as well as social-cultural contingencies. The human urge to procreate was allied with the urge to create. The new human vocation was praxis – the process of action and

reflection to transform surrounding realities to make them more humane.

Symbolic transformations by man and woman also made technology possible. Indeed, technology has enabled human beings to play God. Conquest of time and space through satellites, airplanes, television and radio is part of common everyday experience. The Eskimo in the polar snows, the Bushman in the Kalahari, the Andean Indian fishing in Lake Titicaca, the poor villager working on a small plot of land in the Himalayas are all experiencing the new world in a hundred concrete ways, including the use of matches and medicines, fertilizers and clothing, dipping cattle, riding buses and drinking Coca-Cola from aluminium cans. The brave new world is here and everywhere. Not a single human habitation, not a single human being on the globe is outside of the new technological environment. While symbolic transformations of reality have made technology possible, the new technology is difficult to face, use or invent without an understanding of symbol systems called languages. Thus, literacy has become central to the modern technological culture.

It is a clear, convincing and compelling truth that both culture and technology are today premised on ***universal literacy****. We live in a culture of print. The concept of pre-literate or oral cultures has become empty of real meaning, no more than a scholarly category in theoretical discussions. There is no society in the world today that is fully functioning as an oral culture and in which the illiterate are not, more or less, disadvantaged. There is not a man alive that is not already enveloped in a culture of print. They all need literacy to survive in relation to the literate spouse, the literate money lender, the literate agents of the church, the government and business.*

In today's world, we all speak. But we do not all write and read – that uniquely human capacity. What has been *humanly* possible for almost 5,000 years, has not been *historically* realized, even on the eve of the twenty-first century. The diffusion of literacy world-wide has been politically, socially and economically confounded. About a thousand million adult men and women have been kept behind the impenetrable curtain of the printer's ink to perpetuate the hegemony of the Pundit, the Sultan, the colonizer and those who have dominated the powerless on the basis of color, caste, creed and gender. At the mid-1980s, the literacy/illiteracy figures are a scandal to the sensitive:

ILLITERACY RATES IN THE WORLD AND MAJOR REGIONS BY SEX, 1985

	Illiteracy rates age 15+, 1985		
Region	*Both sexes* %	*Males* %	*Females* %
World	27.7	20.5	34.9
Developed countries	2.1	1.7	2.6
*Developing countries**	38.2	27.9	48.9
Africa	54.0	43.3	64.5
Asia	36.3	25.6	47.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	17.3	15.3	19.2
Least-developed countries	67.6	56.9	78.4

** 98% of the world's illiterates live in the Third World.*

From Unesco. Office of Statistics. Division of Statistics on Education. *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*. Paris, Unesco, 1988. (Statistical reports and studies, no. 30)

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But if literacy is such a virtue, why do the non-literate not demand it? The pity is that the people do not always recognize their self-interests. Many a human need, they have not learned to feel. They do not demand literacy as they do not demand more food but adapt to hunger and malnutrition. They do not demand literacy as they do not demand immunization for their children but let them die untimely deaths. Leaders of peoples must incite new social demands. Leadership must fashion new social needs. Leadership must teach new motivations, including motivations for literacy.

It is a shame that those already literate, and on the right side of the great divide between the literate and non-literate, do not seem too concerned about the scandal of illiteracy. They see no urgency in the situation of a thousand million illiterate shut out of their world. They say that the non-literate is not motivated to learn to read and, therefore, literacy can wait while more urgent things are done first. But we know that in social change there are no firsts and seconds; and indeed, literacy must be made to play a dialectical role in enhancing all development extension and education. They say that the environment of the non-literate does not offer opportunities for the use of literacy. Yet we know that literate environments do not rain from the sky, they must be created by teaching people to read and write and by helping them to put their newly acquired literacy skills to work.

They also tell us that the non-literate are doing quite well without 'impositions' from the outsider. But this may be no more than an excuse. Of course, the non-literate 'survive.' They are born. They grow up. They play. They sing. The marry. They buy and sell. They build huts and home. They make beautiful artefacts. They have children and grandchildren. They develop deep undertandings of life. Some lead and govern their peoples in localities and communities. But it is impos-

sible to deny that at this point in human history, they are clearly, and unquestionably, disadvantaged in relation to the other two and a half thousand million adults who can read and write and, therefore, have available to them the world of print from which the non-literate are excluded. The illiterate, thereby, are excluded and marginalized, as they are disallowed from joining in to define their own world and from contributing to collective knowledge, to history and to culture.

LITERACY AND ITS CORRELATIONS

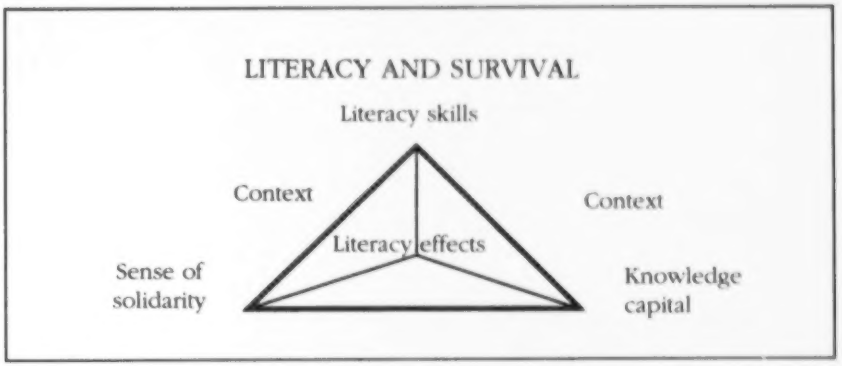
The essense of literacy is the skill to read and write, that is, the ability to code and decode a symbol system – typically the mother tongue.

But we do not merely read, we read *something*. This means that we cannot separate the 'code' (the reading skill) from the 'content' (knowledge in the coded text).

The literacy and knowledge connection is important. Literacy, even when taught by the most conservative, brings the reader in touch with modern, scientific, non-traditional knowledge which is available primarily in print.

There is also the literacy and solidarity connection. Literacy is often *taught in groups*. Coming together in groups gives learners a 'sense of solidarity' and the capacity for the 'transfer of organizational skills' learned in class to other community settings.

Then, there is the question of context. The effects of literacy, of course, are not deterministic. The context regulates what will happen. The effects of literacy, therefore, are both relative and conditional. They are *relative* to the context and *conditioned* by prevailing realities.



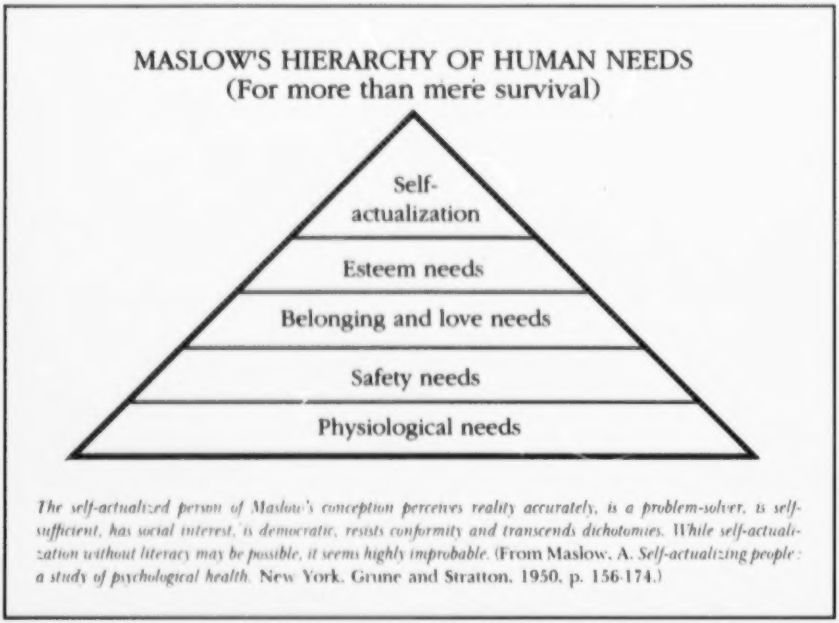
Literacy even by itself sharpens consciousness, creates discontent with the unacceptable, and adds potential to individual capacity for participation. But without congenial structural conditions, results may seem both scant and slow.

Finally, we need to caution in regard to method and proof. We are, of course, not talking here of 'proof' in the narrow sense of hypotheses tested in the laboratory. In the laboratory of real life, we cannot talk of proof based on the 'links of causality' but we can talk of warranted assertions based on the 'links of plausibility'. The assertions we will make about the relationship between literacy and survival are warranted by experience, and are often supported by systematic research.

Survival as a normative ideal, as delineated above, has many aspects. There is, or course, sheer physical survival. But in this truly human society, survival is also economic survival, social survival, political survival and cultural survival.

Literacy and the survival of the physical being

There is the normative involved even in physical survival. As culture has become a partner in the evolutionary process, physical survival needs more than the physical being alone. Literacy and the knowledge that comes with it have become a shield of protection for the human body. Literacy has indeed become a matter of life and death. No wonder that the World Health



The self-actualized person of Maslow's conception perceives reality accurately, is a problem-solver, is self-sufficient, has social interest, is democratic, resists conformity and transcends dichotomies. While self-actualization without literacy may be possible, it seems highly improbable. (From Maslow, A. *Self-actualizing people: a study of psychological health.* New York, Grune and Stratton, 1950, p. 156-174.)

Organization (WHO) has included literacy in their twelve indicators for monitoring the health and well-being of nations and expects the adult literacy rate for both men and women in a country to exceed 70% if Health for All is to become a reality.

Literacy is not an elixir for perpetual youth nor a panacea for all ills, but literacy (with the new scientific knowledge to complement traditional knowledge) makes good health and longevity more likely.

Literate fathers and mothers are less likely to contract syphilis and AIDS and thus more likely to protect

In Mali, illiteracy was estimated at 90.6% in 1976. According to World Bank figures for 1985, infant mortality in Mali was 174:1000, and life expectancy at birth was a mere 46.5 years. In the United Republic of Tanzania, where illiteracy percentages had been brought down to 26.5% in 1978 as part of a continuing mass literacy campaign, the infant mortality rate in 1985 was 110:1000, and life expectancy at birth was 52 years.

The pattern is repeated in Asia. According to Unesco and World Bank figures, Nepal, with an illiteracy rate of 79.4% in 1981, had an infant mortality rate of 133:1000 and a life expectancy at birth of 46.5 years in 1985.

South American countries show the same correlation between literacy on the one hand, and infant mortality and life expectancy at birth on the other. Mexico, with an illiteracy rate of 17.0% in 1980, had an infant mortality rate of 50:1000 and life expectancy at birth of 66.5 years in 1985. Cuba, which had virtually eradicated illiteracy from the country by 1981, had an infant mortality rate of 16:1000 in 1985 and a life expectancy at birth of 75 years.

These correlations hold for the United States' population as well. For example, with the median of 12.5 years of school completed (1985 figures), the white population had an infant mortality rate of 9.6:1000 (1983 figures) and life expectancy at birth was 75.3 years (1985 figures). Compared to this, the U.S. black population had a median figure of 12 for the number of years in school, an infant mortality rate of 20:1000 (1983 figures) and a life expectancy at birth of 69.5 years (1985 figures).

(From Bhola, H.S. Destined for literacy. *Educational horizons* (Bloomington, IN), vol. 66, no. 1, Fall 1987, p. 9-12).

their progeny. Literate mothers die less often in childbirth, are known to lose fewer infants, saving them through immunization from the killer childhood diseases. Literate mothers are much more likely to practice environmental sanitation, saving their families from cholera, malaria and other pestilences. They are able to get more from the food they prepare, thereby enabling their families to have strength to win the fight, should diseases strike.

Physical survival in the new techno'ogical jungle is becoming impossible without literacy. In Kenya hundreds of people are dying every year because they cannot read the labels on chemical fertilizers and poisonous pesticides that they routinely use in their fields and vegetable gardens. Illiterates, more often than the literate, when surrounded by modern technology, become victims of accidents that kill and maim.

What is true at the individual and family level is also true at the collectives level. Illiteracy, infant mortality, ill health and early aging go together:

In 1988, there were 6,000 maternal deaths in industrialized countries. In developing countries, they numbered a horrifying 500,000. Thirty per cent of all maternal deaths occurred in Africa, and more than 60% in Asia.

Literacy and economic survival

Literacy is, again, a tool for economic survival. Literacy increases the effectiveness of all transactions made by the literate in his or her economic environment – in the use of land and tools, and in dealing with the economic institutions of the credit bank and the marketing cooperative.

Literacy is particularly potent for economic survival in the informal sectors of the economy. This is so because the informal economy is less susceptible to metropolitan structures, and the economic decisions thus lie within the context of control of the farmer and

the housewife. Literacy has made 'scientific' agriculture possible in the little kitchen garden and has made 'scientific' poultry farming possible in old tin bath tubs. Subsistence farmers have been able to make better use of the extension services of the government and they have done well at the weighing machine as they have sold their produce to the cooperative. They have been able to read and sign receipts, invoices and checks for the right amounts.

The newly literate farmers have learned entrepreneurship and management skills, and thereby risen above mere subsistence levels. They have learned not only new economic skills but have learned also of new economic opportunities and possibilities in the community, in the township down the road and in the capital.

In the formal economies, of course, literacy has become a sine qua non. Without literacy it is not possible now to enter the formal economy or to retain a job if already obtained. The newly literate have fewer accidents at places of work. They are less paranoid about others in the same work environment and are able to work and organize for the general good of all.

Without literacy it is impossible to survive in relation to today's economic institutions, which lend and borrow, buy and sell, and require that all, literate and illiterate, sign contracts with them.

Literacy and social survival

Social survival as a normative ideal would mean self-esteem, a sense of belonging, opportunities for an authentic expression of personal values, with release from the tyranny of social institutions.

Literacy has indeed released people from the burden of inferiority. They have acquired new social definitions even when their incomes have not improved. The new status makes mutuality possible across age sets,

gender and class. The newly literate do not suffer from social exclusion.

Literacy has changed the social psychology of the family and has enabled the social survival of children in relation to parents, and of girls and women in relation to boys and men in families. The social survival of females in relation to males is of particular importance.

Families with a literate member are not vulnerable to the outsider because they can read their own letters, bills, deeds and contracts. Moreover, literate wives have been known to stop their husbands' philandering once they could read the mail. The literate are able to make use of the telephone – that wonderfully convivial technology – for both economic and social purposes.

Psychic mobility makes possible an expansion of the territoriality of the new literate. It enables connection with those personally unknown to the individual but with whom solidarity is now possible in terms of shared words and shared interests. Literates are able to break out of the hypnosis of ritual, and the stranglehold of social institutions that oppress them.

On the other hand, illiteracy has been known to breed isolation, suicide, recklessness, drug abuse, crime, and teenage marriage and motherhood.

Literacy and political survival

As Lenin put it: 'An illiterate person is outside politics and has to be taught his ABCs'. In contrast, the literate govern. Leaders are almost always literate. The illiterate are almost always followers. Literacy is indeed necessary even to be a good follower. Solidarity with larger groups outside the immediate community is impossible without literacy and communication in writing.

Literacy does empower both in the psychological and the social sense, and is absolutely essential for the understanding and practice of human rights. Literacy

enhances the ability to engage in praxis. On the other hand, the illiteracy of followers makes the abuse of power by leaders more possible.

Survival in relation to political institutions is once again dependent on literacy. In many countries the right to vote is denied to the illiterate. Responsible voting is not easy without literacy. Literacy makes democracy possible and hysterical responses to the tribal drum less likely. The illiterate are indeed being squeezed out of local government institutions of the cooperative and the village council in India. It is well known that the illiterate are unable to get proper treatment from the institutions of justice. They are unable to defend, to witness, to sit on juries. They are often cheated in contracts and are favourite targets of the crook and the swindler.

Literacy and cultural survival

Paradoxical as it might seem, oral cultures must interact with the printed word and the symbol, both for renewal and survival. Oral cultures are fast disappearing. Cultures can no longer be perpetuated through oracy. Literacy is needed – literacy in the mother tongue, the most important instrument of ethnic and cultural pride and social solidarity. Through universalization of literacy, culture-making can be democratized. The new literate can participate, can contribute the best from their traditions and make it count.

There are also intercultural and international implications of literacy and illiteracy. Those capable of cultural survival are better able to make effective transactions with other cultures and engage in the processes of cultural enrichment and renewal, avoiding aimlessness and alienation.

Literacy and the survival of the species

It is notable that all the great prophets of love and peace were literate, and they left their *word* in sacred

scriptures. In our secular world as well, the literate are more likely than illiterate to be proponents of love and peace. Only the literate are likely to have peace and disarmament as part of their individual agenda for a better world. Thus, in the universalization of literacy, there are implications for the survival of the species. With the psychic mobility and the expanded solidarity made possible by literacy, the literate are able to make the world their stage and understand subjects such as the population explosion, protection of the environment, the nuclear threat, disarmament and peace.

JOINING THE STRUGGLE FOR HUMAN SURVIVAL

In this International Literacy Year, we need to make commitments. We need to go beyond arguments in behalf of literacy. We need to act – as individuals, as members of groups and voluntary associations – to make literacy work for human survival and a more humane existence.

The role of literacy should be kept in a proper perspective. Literacy is necessary, but not sufficient for social change. But while the role of literacy is not deterministic, it is not minimal either. Literacy is the instrument by which the knowledge capital is accumulated by individuals. Knowledge, when used by ordinary individuals in making ordinary decisions, transforms them and their world. The effects of literacy, even rudimentary literacy, are dramatic within the locus of control of individual adults, in the informal economy, and within the structure of social and power relationships in the family and the community.

Though universal primary schooling must remain a part of the strategy of 'Education for All', it should not become the total strategy. Massive complementary actions in behalf of adult literacy must be undertaken outside the school. While context should determine how literacy is delivered, the role of national and regional campaigns should be given due consideration. It should be remembered that when properly executed, campaigns have proved to be great mobilizers of enthusiasm and resources.

No sane person would propose dysfunctional literacy – literacy for bondage. But literacy by the state should not be equated with dominant literacy. The role of the state in literacy promotion in the Third World should not be lightly dismissed. Adult literacy is necessary, and should not be postponed or drowned in talk of scarce resources. Governments should be asked to commit a definite percentage of educational resources to adult literacy, consistently and continuously, for a long time into the future.

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